

A Life in 70 Poems

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1966-1975

At this time, far more of the subject matter is taken from real events, such as the death of a colleague who was stabbed by a jealous husband. The 1968 poem also refers to a real person.

1966

The darkness of the stars...
When their meridian cleaving
Like a keen sword pricks the sky.

The shadows fade upon the wall.

The sea's grave bowing.
The wind's light hand plucking fruits,
The interminable coiling of the day,
Relax into a heap of flesh,
All arms and legs, with neck askew,
Wide mouth that dribbles sleep,
And clotted, paper, eyes.

It is a horse blots out the stars.
Or are there stars where that horse canters?

He eats the fruits with glassy flesh.
His strong teeth munch and crunch them up.
Between the stars, the fruits that hide the fruit,
Rustling he moves.
The moon is in his blank white eye.

The nights are cold, his breath a frost.

Eyes break on the stars,
Embittered with lances. Picking the fruit,
Dangerous hands freeze to its brilliant side.

Night-long,
The horse must crop the constellations.,
Then, proud with feeding, face the air
And from his hooves strike out the fires of dawn.

1967

HANDS

Hands in pocket, hand to mouth,
Hand on heart

Hands on head!

From hand to hand,
From hands that greet or part,
In each farewell from hands to lips

Hands on hips!

Hand in glove that pulls the trigger-
Velvet bullets through the heart.

Hands stop blood or ears.
Hands cross on breast.
Hands carry tears.

Not frivolous,
Not manic, furtive, sliding, hands.
We say: clean hands or else

Hands off!

1968

He was the enemy of the stars
And all that blazes finely.
The cool subtle and sinuous evening air
Slid over his shoulders and froze his hands
In a tragically futile gesture.
out of internal poverty he created external despair.
And in the desperate silences of the spirit
There hummed a quiet little brutal angel
of the muscle and the mind;
A toughie, yes, a toughie.
Slanting smoke, a chisel stroke,
But chisel to flesh and still without substance,
Still just words, arid detritus,
The loathsome leavings on a glistening frame of flesh.
Would he be smiling in a black sombrero?
Who can tell, caro amigo?

But it was not the smiler that pushed the button,
Not the kindly humorous quizzical old smiler
That sent the hand glancing over the paper,
That whispered words in a mechanical ear,

That patiently traced the dead forms,
That sank self-condemned in oily iridescence.

I do not know who you are,
Striding out to crush the insignificant,
In a swirl of jabbing, hacking, elegantly executed,
Elephantine gestures, paradoxically combining
An artist in bed-sitter land, a voyeur in Woolworth's,
The sadist at afternoon tea,
Impelled increasingly by custom to unfurl his tightrope.

I do not know who you are.
The slow saturnine contemptuous flesh
Proudly tells me something.
I do not know.

1969

The knife spoke
Deep to the heart,
In swirling patterns of suspicion and hate
And lacy imprints of conventional lies
Just as you were backing away
In the room that cost a kiss a day,
Still expressing a wish to placate
While your delicate hands are trying to pray
With the glass of gin and tonic
Bought to buy off an old ritual
You did not believe possible to replay
In this age where computers count
The last throb and itch of any spend.
Well how does it feel in the end
Old buddy
To have the bitch in your side
And the steel
Cut your expensive skin
Like a polished sneer
And to fall on the expensive carpet
In an inelegant smear?
Was this always your secret fear
As you sat at your desk
Hiding your neat frayed cuffs,
Hating us, even while
You smiled that cold and marble smile?

1970

PARTY

And this is how it looks
Yes this is how it looks
With the dim lighting from the one red bulb
(Do you remember, in the Louvre, that Egyptian carving

Darker than darkness in its own private cave?).
And the forms bent in chairs, talking,
Earnestly smiling, impressively shaping the air with hands.
The music meanwhile is endlessly reiterated
On a tape that is oh-so-cunning.
Comes the end it turns itself backwards and starts all over again.
Don't we all darling? What was that you said?
Well don't think I'm not bored with you also.
Go away and fuck yourself.
I shall take a sip of this nasty Algerian wine,
Head to one side, like a rather old doped parrot.
Just a sip, and the glass is empty
(I pass her weeping in the red-lit corridor,
On the couch are two lesbians fast asleep
With faces like angels. The door to the gents is locked).
Just a sip and the head is empty
And she is weeping in the corridor
And all the rooms are only shadows on the walls.
The kitchen reeks of wine. There is wine and glass on the floor.
On the floor too, a middle aged woman with a very red face.
Hello ducky. Hello. Hello.
(Who is the red fool in the mirror bending over her?).
Oh God, my head hurts. She has earrings like wax fruit.
Her head hurts too. Yes it gives that impression.
Outside the door figures gather. They whisper and cackle.
What happened in the twenty first year of his age?
Nothing but he was given over to folly.
And in the thirtieth? He must have gone mad.
It does not bear think about.
You must be a depressive.
Yes I am a depressive, we are all depressives.
There is not an elative among us.
To think (he said) that I have spent ten years
Trying not to be bourgeois, not to hear guitars and folk songs,
And now it is smart to hear guitars and folk songs.
Is it smart? Are you so smart little smarty?
Arty smarty at a party likes to talk to hairy hearty.
The Twist was meant for lesbians and they are childishly wearied,
Pale fragile heads, tumbled hair, deep eyelids stained blue.
Now individual inclinations reassert. Some sing Dowland.
Some search for dregs of wine. Some say they work tomorrow.
The party's over. The tape drones unobserved.
The door bangs. Hello street.
Hello dawn. Sweet wet pavements I kiss you.
Ah, what it is to be drunk at this hour of the morning.

1971

GHOST

The looped curtains part their dusty cords,
Rich shadows melt and sink.
The midnight ghost storms to the door
With bright eyes penny blank.

The music in the background plays
Suspended like dark clots of blood.
Fear's finger plunges in my side:
She-spectres never mean good.

Gravely the ghost bows over me,
Her breath smells honey-sweet.
"Oh come with me, my fancied love,
Before it is too late".

Together we float over placid lawns,
Blue windows where they watch TV
And nodding parsley heads of trees
Sunk in memory.

The windward edge of the moon was furred
With cobwebs newly spun
And there we heard the faery sounds
Of Duke Ellington.

Then the ghost whispered
"Though you think that age will dull
These phantom pleasures,
Age never will".

The looped curtains fell back
And my lizard skin crawled
With the endless repeat
Of the dawn of the world.

1972

DOVES AND ROSES

Come down, prismatic dove,
With your olive-tipped wings,
Your wedding-ring eye.

Come down, to eat the musk-sweet roses!

Let your cold eggs throb to a halt
And your mourning voice
Hang in the cypresses and Japanese gardens.

Your claws like sunrise pierce
The tender slanted lawns.
Your saracen wings chop the air
Chilled by fountains bubbling whitely.

For still the courtly mediaeval roses
Endlessly wither, or are torn.

Only your bright droppings bring a ray of hope.

1973

Evening brings rain

Evening brings rain
And all the new cars
With their hard black tyres
Run through the puddles.

Doors slam... doors open...
Shutting off the day... opening the evening...
Perhaps luxurious,
Small and quiet and certainly intimate.

Because of this rain,
The garden remains mysterious,
Unmoved by spade, untrimmed,
Opulent, weed-choked,
A dancing-space for cats.

Because of this rain,
The rumbling world mysteriously pauses,
Light rests
A brief moment on the lawn.
Leaves do not fall.

Only the rain

Falls continuously
And its hard black pencils write
Potash, bone-meal, organic fertiliser,
To those who dry the spoons and say
"It's what the garden needed, is this rain".

1974

DEATH OF DUKE ELLINGTON

Dirt in the groove, the needle sticks
Firm in the flesh that slackens,
Weary but syncopatient.
At his last concert he played briefly.
The audience was angry, demanded more-
Did you then love them madly, Duke?
You gave them what is asked for-
What is always asked for in the end-
Death of the Artist.

Did Ellington reach the earthly paradise.

He tried hard. They were in a boat on
the streaming water, hanging a drum and
blowing a trumpet. They dangled the
saxophones overboard to cool.
I heard them coming but I could not see them.
The music spilled over the hill into my ear.
It made a lake in the hollow of my hand ear
And they were in the boat on the lake
And the lake was spinning round
Turning in a groove towards the centre;
As the lake spun.
They had no shadows but the music had shadows.
The music had a shadow denser than its substance
The music was a dense liquid in a roaring shell
That I held to my ear and heard him play.

But the switch flips and the ship drifts
On the swollen tide as the tide runs
And the wind moans and the ship rocks...
A ringed hand trailing in the water...
And playing somewhere through the mists
A tune that stops the clocks.
That music now can never change:
Only you could change it with a new trick
But your tricks have all been played.

The wind dies.
The sheet drops.
A hand trails down the bed,,
Taps briefly one last tune,
Stops, rots.

1975

'Inexplicably anguished in harmony.'

O dolorous sound!
Heavily veiled, the faces, grey, amorphous, were by lightning struck,
Then to white flame turning. Screams were forced
Endlessly through bubbling throats,
Gusts of hot air from black lungs,
Smelling of scorched meat.

'Inexplicably anguished in harmony'.

Could they not suffer
Silently, like moths, folding dark wings?
Most beautiful that pain. But this harmony
Of voices, blasted forms,
Rises, floating, from a violet throbbing centre-
Fluttering arms, heads,
Like dangling beads of flesh-
Collapses outside the charmed circle.

And such anguish cannot be explained.
To you and I it cannot. We only must
Endure the harmony- world harmony,
Infinite harmony, infinite harmony.

The title comes from a review by a music critic.